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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the premise that writing is a central means for learning, clarifying, organizing, and expressing ideas and information, and that all teachers should share responsibility for helping students to become writers both inside and outside of the classroom. The paper's aim is to find answers to the following questions: Why do teachers and students consider writing skills to be generally more difficult to develop than reading skills and regard them as skills yielding poorer results? and How should writing be taught so that the learners can enjoy the process of writing and attain proficiency and skills that lead to success as adult writers? In a search for answers, the focus was on two things: creating motivation, and stages of the writing process. The paper first discusses the level of writing skills and the essence of writing, and sets out several ideas for approaching writing in school. It also discusses how to design a writing task that will motivate learners. In considering the writing process, the paper contends that analysis of the writing process is necessary, since it helps the learner break down a whole into its constituents. It recommends a writing activity that can be divided into three major areas: supporting actions and strategies "before writing, during writing, and after writing," and it discusses each of these areas in turn. The paper finds that the major precondition necessary for shaping a good writer is to develop students' reflective thinking. (NKA)

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Learning To Write:
From Choosing the Topic to Final Draft.

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Learning to Write: From Choosing the Topic to Final Draft

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This article is based on the premise, that (1) writing is a central means for learning, clarifying, organizing and expressing ideas and information, and (2) all teachers should share responsibility for helping students to become writers both inside and outside of the classroom.

Consequently, we are seeking to find answers to the following questions:

- Why do school teachers and students consider writing skills to be generally more difficult to develop than reading skills and regard them as skills yielding poorer results?
- How should writing be taught so that the learners can enjoy the process of writing, and attain proficiency and skills that lead to success as adult writers?

In a search for the answers we focus on two things: (1)**creating motivation and (2)stages of the writing process.**

Levels of writing skills and the essence of writing

Writing is one of four skills in which a learner must become proficient at school. But this skill includes different levels and functions.

If we regard writing (1) as **a technical skill**, then usually learners attain this competence during the first school stage.

Writing in a wider sense, in other words writing as (2) **creating of a text and a specific way of forwarding a message**, belongs to **productive skills**, the level of which strongly effects accomplishments in all the subjects, and in addition defines the scope of self expression in all the domains of the learner's adult life.

Writing as (3) a **means of structuring one's thinking, as well as clarifying and rendering ideas**, is an important process in developing independent thinking and learning. Writing as a supporting means of thinking operation is not only searching for the right words, it is also searching for the right causes and solutions through these words, creating a system of values and submitting a judgement. Writing makes thinking visible, thus helping to discover gaps and discrepancies as well as expertise and innovation in thinking.

Writing by its nature is a social function, since the writer is usually aware of the existence of the reader. In a perfect writing process the writer, when creating a text, tries to shape his ideas in the best manner, he tries to solve problems, find explanations to phenomena and situations and through his message to debate with a message recipient, i.e. to debate with the reader, or to exercise through his ideas an influence on the reader, suggesting solutions and answers.

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Continuos writing skills are laid down in school

Whether writing – be it routine filling out questionnaires or a demanding scientific or literary work – will be for the learner a difficult and boring task for the rest of his life, usually accompanied by failure, or whether he will enjoy it, gaining recognition and success – largely depends on the writing experience and the extent strategies and writing skills were mastered in school. These skills are developed not only at the native language lessons; teachers in all subjects have a possibility to develop writing skills. Actually this domain provides a great number of possibilities to integrate all subjects.

What students learn about writing in school are mainly technical, i.e. non-personal skills – they learn letters, words, grammar, spelling rules, outline and structure of the writing etc. An essay or composition are predominant forms of the writing. It is the writing of a composition that is focused on and refined at school most of all, since the success of the college entrance composition is closely connected with the prospect of further studies. The outcome may be a form that is refined up to perfection but has no author's individuality. The paradox is that in their future lives learners very seldom need this type of text.

Writing is a demanding activity for the learner and time-consuming work for the teacher. For the teacher it means certain additional work, but due to the importance of the writing process and its effect on developing thinking and learning, many teachers believe that all the additional work is worthwhile.

To properly approach writing in school one must bear in mind quite simple things, which are not always appreciated adequately.

- Learners should experience different kinds of writings; diversity should apply to the selection of topics, genres and addressees. Students should receive a variety of types of evaluation and feedback.
- All subject teachers are responsible for the development of writing skills; this requires teamwork and coordination of their activities, and yet the initiative most often comes from language teachers.
- When approaching writing, in order to enhance both achievement and satisfaction from the process itself, one must bear in mind that the work be attainable, engaging and appropriate for the students' age.
- The writing assignment becomes more inspiring if it can be presented not only to the teacher, but also to a wider audience.
- By transferring into the classroom texts and writing experience from outside of school it is possible to underline the importance of developing writing skills in a wider context.
- The interest of teachers and other readers in the writing process and its final product should be genuine; feedback, recognition and assessment of the activity must be objective and tactful. It concerns, in particular, that the teacher and other classmates really care about the ideas submitted by students and the writing and thinking that develops and so these topics become important for learners themselves as well.

When this approach is followed in school it can be maintained by the learners for the rest of their lives.

DEVELOPING WRITING MOTIVATION

Studies show that motivation has a stronger effect on the final outcome of learning than intellectual faculties and preliminary knowledge. Learning motivation depends on a probability of gaining success and its subjective value. These pedagogical psychology principles should also be the basis for organizing the writing process.

When designing a writing task we, teachers, have to bear in mind, that the learners` motivation is higher if the task is a **challenge** for them, if there is a certain **freedom of choice**, if they know how to accomplish the task, i.e. they can keep **control** over the process and, if necessary, can turn to their peers (and the teacher) for help, in other words, to **work in a team.**

So as teachers we should first of all ask ourselves a question – what, **from the learners` point of view**, is the consideration and purpose of writing as well as the value of completed work? And only thereafter, what writing, thinking and learning skills, would we like our learners to develop? It means, that we should first of all start with evoking inner motivation.

The learning process, in general, is driven by motivation, which also applies to writing. So the teacher must be assured that the learner finds answers to the following questions:

- Why am I writing?
- What are the considerations related to my future writing?
- What do I know about this problem or/and topic?
- What do I think and feel about it?

Writing has yet another important motivation aspect – the recipient, i.e. awareness of who the **readers** are. This presents further questions.

- What do I want to tell the reader?
- What does the reader know about the topic?
- Can I freely express my thoughts?
- What viewpoint or position would I like to or should I express, depending on the influence I want to exercise on the reader?

After all the above questions are discussed with students, a writing motive, based on a given idea or problem, will arise. This writing motive will finally turn into a **topic** and **genre framework**. As a result we have a three-dimensional pattern, the elements of which are connected by the **purpose.**

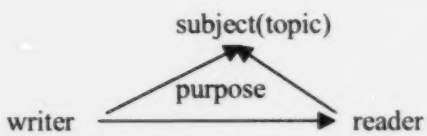

Figure 1. Subjects of writing process

When thinking about the writing assignment in school, we see that it is not always motivating. The lack of motivation may be due to the neglect of one or even more parts of the triangle.
Ruddell (1997) brings up the following problems.

The typical content area of the writing assignment is an essay or a report in which (a) the topic is selected by the teacher, (b) the subject is written about by the student, who records and documents things, (c) the premise is to "Show what you know", and (d) the product is graded by the teacher, who is the "audience".
Perhaps the biggest problem, the one that serves as the umbrella for all of the others, is the question of ownership. Who owns the writing? How can students be motivated to invest themselves when they have little or no choice of topic, no way to make any personal connection between the information they have gathered and their world, little prior knowledge to help them construct meaning, and no opportunity to process the information in a form or format that makes sense to them?
If teachers rate independent thinking and argumentation skills highly, they should give students assignments that support development of such skills.
We may say that a good motivating writing assignment secures half of the success, since, in addition, writing skills are also important. Writing is a process before it is a product. No writer sits down and composes one perfect sentence, then a second, then a third. More commonly, writing involves some combination of thinking, writing, gathering new information, rewriting, organizing, adding, deleting and editing. Next we shall reflect on the stages of the writing process and consider which supporting mechanisms learners could use at certain stages of this process.

ORGANIZATION OF THE WRITING PROCESS

Not depending on the sort of writing or genre it is important to see to it that all its stages, based on the principles of didactics, are included in the writing process.
The analysis of the writing process is necessary, since it helps the learner to break down a big whole (sometimes a frightening one) into its constituents, the intermediate goals of which are simple to reach and which finally guarantee a good entire product. During the process the teacher can assist the student by familiarizing him with strategies and methods appropriate for particular stages of writing. The activity can be divided into three major areas: supporting actions and strategies **before writing, during writing and after writing.**

BEFORE WRITING

The writing process should begin with the selection of a topic and genre. The more clearly the topic is formulated, the easier it is to start writing. The more abstract the topic is, the more profound preliminary work is needed before writing.

It is important to discuss with learners the selection of the topic, propose alternatives and identify their preferences. The following questions may help the learner to select a topic:

Which topic interests you most?
Which will require the most research (and will sources be available?)
Which topic are you willing to devote your time to?

The writing is a success only in case the topic area and identification of a particular title/wording is intriguing for the students, is approved and accepted by them. The following topic categories work well:

- Proverbs (Never say never, etc.);
- Viewpoints (EU: prosperity or trouble; Indifference is a crime);
- Intriguing statements;
- Questions (Moderate evil is not evil. What would I change if I were a school principal?);
- The topic of "most" (My most unusual hobby);
- Opposing statements (Money – power and opportunities), etc.

To a certain extent the genre is determined by the topic, but here it is necessary to avoid a routine approach. It is generally known that the existing composition format does not encourage learners to more dynamically express their ideas. That is why diversity of genres is so useful:

- An essay
- A diary
- Electronic correspondence
- A dialogue with a character/author of the writing
- An interview with a prominent person (also from the past) etc.,

if, for a certain purpose, the learner has to enter into the role of the writer and to perceive particular subject matter and situation. Simulation, aimed at enhancing the writing process, is connected with both the abilities to understand / use style conception and learners` abilities to comprehend / use their personal experience as well as factual material. Other genres for a change could be:

- a story or article etc. for a newspaper
- an inquiry
- an answer to a notice
- a text based on a chart, figure, diagram etc.
- a report
- a text for a presentation
- a description
- a personal letter
- general texts etc.

Learning to write becomes much more dynamic if texts are based on actual events.

In addition to topic selection writing requires (2) **preparation**. This stage includes **gathering material** and **mental "tuning up"** for writing i.e. inspiration. Depending on the writing gathering material can be a short- or long-term process. Some writers will actually try to outline a paper at this stage, and that may work if they already know a lot about the topic. But most probably to do a good job more information is needed. It requires a realization of what is already known and what needs to be known in order to write a good paper on the topic. To aid in organizing thoughts it is possible to use a sheet of paper folded down the middle. Open it flat, and on one side sketch what *is* already know. Use the other side to list questions that still need to be answered.

Brainstorming and free writing are also good strategies at this stage. Writing is a creative act, and it requires students to make use of thinking skills necessary for any endeavor. Different warm-up exercises, aimed at enhancing fluency, flexibility and distinction of thoughts, can also be used for putting down preliminary ideas and thoughts.

For example, before writing a paper about "Happiness", students could do the following:

(a) If you could smell, taste, feel, see the happiness, how would you describe it?
(b) Talk to your classmates and teachers about happiness and the way they experience it.

If our goal is to teach writing a dialogue, then take another example:

(a) If you could talk to your pencil, what would you like to say to it?
(b) You know what you would say to your pencil. How would your pencil answer you? What kind of talk would the two of you have? Happy? Angry? (L.Mammen, 1998)

The following modified version of K-W-L table (Ogle,1986) can be used when dealing with a topic that requires serious research work.

Know	Resources	Questions	Learned
What do I know that will help me to write on this topic?	What resources are available to help me research the topic?	What do I need to know about this topic to do a good job?	What have I learned from my resources?

The next writing stage is (3) **organizing material and planning.** It includes drawing up a plan, that can be designed with the help of a mind map, a list, subtitles, human relations` map, heuristic questions or a classical outline (describe, compare, analyze, synthesize, implement, contend etc.).

At this stage the decision about the volume of work, its structure, way of presenting the subject (by generalizing, analyzing, particularizing etc.) as well as the style is made. At this point the writer should have a clear idea from whose point view the subject will be presented, his own attitude in relation to the topic: neutral, propitious/advocating or disapproving/criticizing. Secondly, in order to choose orientation, aimed at exercising desirable influence on the recipient, the writer has to know who the potential reader will be.

At this stage the following methods would be helpful:

- Individual work
- Work in pairs
- Group work
- Discussion webs
- Debates
- Argumentation games
- Verbal games
- Mind/fantasy games

To reveal the subject of the future writing one can use Edward de Bono`s (1992) "6 thinking hats" strategy, aimed at identifying the approach to the topic from 6 different aspects: ideas and considerations based on positive, negative, innovative, factual, emotional and integral approach.
After thorough preparatory work writing itself will be much easier.

DURING WRITING

Next comes (1) a **rough draft.** At this stage the writer knows already what strategies (or a strategy) of handling the topic he will use - a systematizing, analytical, grouping, opposing or comparing strategy. When making a rough draft you should bear in mind, that it is not a final copy, so there is no need to worry about the structure of the sentence, spelling or even the order of paragraphs. Use the writing to help you think your paper through. If you have a feeling that you are not doing a good job and you are totally confused, telling your classmate or teacher about it may help. Telling a classmate about your problems or ideas will usually help to organize your thoughts and get back to writing.

Subsequent work on the draft may be done with or without the teacher's help, individually, in pairs or in a group. In all the above cases the participants should bear in mind that they are dealing with a work in process. It means, that only supporting and advising measures, recommendations, corrections, additions etc., but not evaluations or disapproving criticism are allowed. It is important to maintain a supportive and constructive working atmosphere.

In the case of young writers it is advisable to teach them some technical skills, i.e. how to make a rough draft so that later corrections, additions, changes etc. will be easy to make.

Often the teacher is not able to be a partner of every student, i.e. to provide every student with immediate feedback aimed at refining the text. The teacher, as a rule, evaluates the final product. That is why when revising the writing, working in pairs and providing mutual feedback should be practiced more widely. The advantage of this kind of work reveals itself in a number of areas:

- Development of social skills
- Development of reading and listening skills
- Development of skills of critical assessment of the text (evaluation skills)
- The mutual generation of ideas that is enriching for both the reader and writer.

If collective work elements of the writing process are not sufficiently practiced in school it is wise to consider strategies aimed at exchanging ideas about the writing, discussing the text, contemplating and asking questions as well as giving advice. For that students can use proof sheets, which can be exchanged during feedback.

If the help of classmates is not available, the writers themselves should enter into the role of the reader and look at the paper as an outsider: What explanations need fine-tuning? Are there holes in your paper – things you've thought of but have not yet written down? It is important to remember that readers can skip some of what is there, but if there is something missing, they will be forced to guess (and will probably not guess correctly). Do the paragraphs group information in ways that are clear? This is also the

time to make sure that your introduction in fact introduces the paper you've written. This part of the writing process is probably the most variable. Sometimes you will find yourself with a very nearly complete and sensible rough draft. Other times, you may have to go back to the research stage, and then work forward again.

(2) When working on the **final draft** the author has the right and option to revise the rough draft, the content and style, and to consider, though not necessarily accept, the recommendations. After all, all authors want to maintain their individuality and concept and be responsible for their own work.

Going through all the stages provides writers with an opportunity to finalize their ideas and find the best wording for them, which means they can, if necessary, defend them.

AFTER WRITING

Every writing, as a rule, has its recipient, i.e. its reader. It imposes certain obligations and restrictions on the writing. But as it has been mentioned before, at the same time it is one of the strongest writing motivations. The writer expects to get a **feedback** from the teacher, classmates or a wider audience. In school, unfortunately, the teacher too often remains the only reader. The outcome is that the only writing motivation is a good grade and desire to create a text which will please the teacher. However, it does not always encourage independent, creative and enthusiastic thinking. The solution will be in expanding the circle of readers.

In the writing process one should not forget providing feedback. It is good, if the writer is provided with some forms of communication through his text not only with the teacher – the examiner, but with his peers as well. A number of long-term projects provide this opportunity:

- Writing a book (books): students make a book based on their writings and which is designed for reading to their peers or younger children;
- Publication of students` works, at least within the school itself;
- An agreement with the so-called feedback group, i.e. certain papers will be written for certain student groups, so that all the writers will have to play the roles of both readers and feedback providers.

Why not include parents in this circle as well, together with class – and schoolmates, other teachers and all other possible target groups?

Other options for publishing and addressing the text:

- Class wallboard news
- Student's portfolios
- Thematic files
- Parents or other persons (a school principal, public figures, certain officials etc.)

Figure 2. illustrates activities at different stages of the writing process.

Writing stage	**Strategy, activity**
Before writing	Writing Warm-up Proverbs Viewpoints Intriguing or opposing statements Questions Brainstorming Mind map, additions Categorizing notions, systematizing Visualizing cognitive chain (tables, charts)
During writing	The first stage Brainstorming Free writing K-W-L RAFT Role Map Discussion Web Point-of-view Study Guides Interviews
	The second stage Mind Map Story Map The Pyramid Diagram List Set of subtitles Structured Notetaking Scheme (describe, compare, analyze, synthesize, apply and argue)
	The third stage Rough draft writing
	The fourth stage Final draft writing
After writing	Presentation of the work, publication Author's Chair Feedback-debates, critique, discussions

Only through writing can one become a good writer. The writing process can be taught and learned. Correct strategies can influence one's approach to writing.

The major precondition, necessary for shaping a good writer, is to develop students` reflective thinking, so that they know what to write about. The learner should

develop an approach that could be expressed as the following motto: Remember what you want to say or write about, the words will be handy.

In the best writing-infused classrooms, the following goals are met:

1) students have learned ways to use writing to learn course material,
2) they understand the importance of revision to refine their thinking as well as their writing,
3) they believe teachers are interested in actually reading their papers, and not simply grading them.

Writing skills are not only one of the major skills that the student has to learn in school in order to manage in the future life. These skills, being an effective means of expression and a "tangible" proof that the person is linguistically able to communicate, provide the person with self-confidence.

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